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AUTHOR Hecht, Deborah; Fusco, Dana R.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined 64 eighth-grade students' perceptions of opportunities available from participating in service learning and contrasted these with perceived learning opportunities available in school. Each student was enrolled in a 10-week required service learning course. Students visited service sites daily and had reflection periods two times per week during which they wrote in journals and discussed concerns. Sites included preschools or day care centers, senior centers, an elementary school, and a school for disabled children. Participants in service learning reported the following: the experience provided different learning opportunities than school; most strongly felt they made a contribution and had the opportunity to express important personal values; and they felt less bored, more grown up, and more important during service learning than during school. However, the finding that school improved their opportunities for the future more than service learning seemed a function of a small subset of students (n=9) who reported they learned "nothing" from participating in service learning. When these students were dropped from all analyses, this difference was no longer statistically significant. Results indicated great variability within sites. This suggested that the specific activities in which students engaged at a particular site needed to be more closely studied. Students who viewed reflection positively also reported more opportunities available from service learning. (Contains 12 references) (YLB)

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Student Perceptions of the Opportunities Available from Participating in Service Learning

Deborah Hecht
Dana R. Fusco

Center for Advanced Study in Education
CUNY Graduate School

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Student Perceptions of the Opportunities Available from Participating in Service Learning

The objective of this paper is to examine middle school students' perceptions of the opportunities available from participating in service learning and to contrast these with perceived learning opportunities available in school. Characteristics of the service experience are explored in relation to students' reports of perceived learning opportunities.

Service learning involves young people actively participating in their community by providing services at sites, such as day care centers, senior centers, nursing homes, museums, parks, elementary schools, schools for the handicapped, etc. The activities students engage in often vary across sites. Helpers at a preschool might teach students to write their names or learn a song. At a city park, helpers might survey the environment and decide on a beautification plan such as planting flowers. Through service learning students are given the opportunity to take responsibility, make decisions, work cooperatively and establish positive relationships with peers, teachers, and other adults. Unlike community service, Service Learning also involves scheduled periods of reflection. Reflection is frequently highlighted as a key element of the service experience (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993; National Helpers Network, 1994). During reflection students can discuss and evaluate their actions, "converting service experiences into productive learning experiences" (Toole & Toole, 1995, p. 100). It is during reflection that students can become better at identifying potential obstacles in planning and coping with community problems, and learn alternatives for acting in the face of uncertainty (Batchelder & Root, 1994).

Service Learning has been promoted by many as a way to help facilitate the school-to-work transition (Conrad & Hedin, 1991), develop caring individuals (Harrington, 1992), and encourage citizenship and civic responsibility (Briscoe, 1991; Rutter & Newmann, 1989). Research has found that students who engage in some form of service activity gain knowledge about the activity and themselves, experience an increased sense of competence, hold more positive attitudes about the community, have a greater sense of responsibility and develop problem solving and critical thinking skills (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Hamilton & Zeldin, 1987; Newmann & Rutter, 1983).

Although the benefits of service learning continue to be documented, the value of including a service learning program in a school's curriculum is still questioned. Although service programs are rarely introduced as a way to directly increase achievement, they often compete with academic programs for

resources and time. Policy decisions regarding the inclusion of a service program in a school's curriculum involve deciding on its added benefit(s). Additional evidence is needed which documents that service learning provides students with opportunities not afforded by school.

Pilot work, leading to the present study, found that students reported Service Learning helped them in areas of social and personal growth, areas not necessarily facilitated within traditional academic contexts. After completing a year of Service Learning, approximately 200 New York City students were asked, *How do you think service learning changed you?* An analysis of student responses resulted in 8 categories - Community Awareness, Establishing Relationships, Communication Skills, Feelings about Self, Respect, Caring, Career Awareness, and Specific Job Skills. The goal of this pilot work was to begin to characterize student perceptions of growth after participating in a service learning program. The results, however, were not contrasted with students' perceptions of school and did not look at the opportunities available from service learning, but rather the perceived outcome of participating.

In the present study, our focus was to compare students' perceptions of the opportunities afforded by Service Learning with those provided during school classes. Additionally, we were interested in exploring possible features of the service experience which might be related to students' perceptions. Specifically, we considered: a) students' perceptions of reflection as an integral part of the program, b) when service occurred, e.g., the semester, quarter, year; and c) the site at which students worked.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 64 eighth-grade students from one suburban New York school. Forty-two percent of the sample were boys and 58% were girls. Students at this school are predominantly Caucasian (78%) from middle-class backgrounds. The service program at this school is based upon the Helper Model, a model developed specifically for middle school students (National Helpers Network, 1994; see Table 1 for key features of this model). Each student was enrolled in a 10-week service learning course required of all 8th-grade students. Students visit their service sites daily and have reflection two times per week during the 10-week period, or quarter. During reflection students write in their journals and then spend time discussing their concerns. Students at this school work at one of 10 sites based on their own preference. The sites include six preschools or day care centers, two senior centers, one elementary school, and one school for disabled children. The data presented here are from students who completed Service Learning during quarters one (n = 29) or two (n = 35) of the 1995-96 academic year.

Materials and Procedure

Sixty-four eighth-grade students at the participating school completed two surveys in the beginning of the school year and at the end of their service experience. The first was Developmental Opportunities (Newmann & Rutter, 1983) to which students rate their experiences in relation to a specific setting. For instance, students indicate how often they are in a position to make important decisions, work cooperatively, examine their values, confront new situations and solve problems on their own. For the purpose of the present study, 17 of the 18 Likert-type statements were answered in relation to the settings - School Classes (pre and post) and Service Learning (post only). Based on pilot work, the statement, "Adults treated me unfairly," was dropped. Students respond to statements using a 5-point scale from Never True (1) to Almost Always True (5). Responses to the Developmental Opportunities statements are discussed as individual items and as summed scores within settings.

The second survey students completed was the Student Service Learning Survey (Hecht, Schine & Fusco, 1995). Students indicated how often five affective adjectives (bored, grown up, important, sure of self, and responsible) represented their feelings about school (pre and post) and service learning (post only). The scale's continuum was 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes) and 3 (often). On the post survey, students also answered four questions concerning their perceptions of reflection. Specifically, How often did you (from Never to Always) . . . Better understand why things happened; Feel embarrassed or uncomfortable; Learn new or better ways to work; and Think reflection was a waste of time. Two yes/no questions were also answered: *Would you like to do Service Learning again?* and *Would you recommend Service Learning to a friend?* Finally, students responded to one open-ended question, *What did you learn from doing Service Learning?*

Table 1

Essential Elements of a Quality Helper Program

* Service which continues for at least 10 weeks (duration)
* Training and ongoing **reflection**, with guidance, to provide students with the skills, knowledge and understanding they will need to meet their responsibilities;
* A skilled, understanding Program Leader
* A voice for youth in planning
* Service which fills a real community need
* A clear understanding among young people, the school or sponsoring organization, and the site supervisors
* Clear service and learning outcomes
* A firm element in the school's or community-based organization's schedule; not a "hit or miss" program

Results

I. Students' Perceptions of Opportunities - School vs. Service

Students generally agreed with the Developmental Opportunities statements, indicating they felt both service learning and school provided opportunities for learning. On a 5-point scale (Never to Almost Always True), the mean responses to the individual school items ranged from 3.19 to 4.05; the mean responses to the individual service learning items ranged from 3.62 to 4.17. Summed and individual post-survey responses to the Developmental Opportunities for School Classes and Service Learning were compared using t-tests. The alpha reliability coefficients for the 17 Developmental Opportunities items were .89 for the School scale and .92 for the Service Learning scale, at post-testing. Newmann & Rutter (1983) report similar reliabilities with high school students, .88 for School and .95 for Fieldwork.

Using summed scores, there was no significant difference between students' perceptions of the developmental opportunities during school (M = 62.87, sd = 11.94) and those during service learning (M = 65.17, sd = 14.59), $t(46) = -1.26$, $p = .22$. However, student responses to six of the seventeen items differed for school and service learning at the .02 level. Table 2 presents the means to each item for both settings, along with obtained t-values. The two largest differences were to item 2, "I felt I made a contribution," and to item 11, "I expressed important personal values," with students reporting that service learning provided more opportunities than school. Students also reported that during service learning they were more likely to receive appropriate credit or blame (item 3), have young people respect their efforts (item 8), and examine important personal values (item 10). The only item on which school was rated more positively than service learning was for improving students opportunities for the future (item 9).

Table 2

Developmental Opportunities for School and Service Learning
Means (Standard Deviations in parentheses), t-values

Statement	n	School Classes	Service Learning	t-value
1 My ideas and comments were taken seriously.	57	3.49 (1.14)	3.77 (1.36)	-1.25 p=.22
2 I felt I made a contribution.	58	3.40 (1.18)	4.17 (1.16)	-4.33* p=.00
3 I received appropriate credit or blame.	55	3.58 (1.10)	4.00 (1.14)	-2.50* p=.02

Table 2 (continued)

Statement	n	School Classes	Service Learning	t-value
4 I was free to solve problems on my own.	57	3.75 (1.21)	3.81 (1.30)	- .23 p=.82
5 I made important decisions.	56	3.66 (1.15)	3.71 (1.32)	- .25 p=.80
6 I thought carefully about difficult judgments.	58	3.90 (.99)	3.74 (1.33)	.80 p=.43
7 Adults took notice of my work.	56	3.98 (1.17)	4.04 (1.26)	- .24 p=.81
8 Other young people respected my efforts.	56	3.61 (1.28)	4.05 (1.15)	-2.34* p=.02
9 Improved my opportunities for the future.	57	3.91 (1.12)	3.53 (1.28)	2.36* p=.02
10 I had to examine some important personal values.	58	3.22 (1.19)	3.62 (1.18)	-2.46* p=.02
11 I expressed important personal values.	58	3.19 (1.19)	3.64 (1.31)	-2.68* p=.01
12 I discussed carefully questions about my experiences.	58	3.48 (1.26)	3.66 (1.29)	- .94 p=.35
13 I participated in activities I had never done before.	56	3.52 (.97)	3.70 (1.28)	- .96 p=.34
14 I was exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world.	58	3.55 (1.17)	3.78 (1.34)	-1.21 p=.23
15 I wondered about whether I would do good work.	58	3.55 (1.20)	3.62 (1.32)	- .38 p=.71
16 I tried my hardest, gave my best effort.	57	4.05 (1.03)	4.16 (1.13)	- .76 p=.45
17 I accomplished things I never thought I could do.	58	3.85 (.99)	3.64 (1.40)	1.22 p=.23

Note: Students respond on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never True) to 5 (Almost Always True).

Responses to the affective items were also compared using t-tests. In general, students had positive affect towards both service learning and school. However, statistically significant differences were found on three of the five items. Students reported they were less bored during service learning and more likely to feel grown-up and important (see Table 3).

Table 3

Affect toward School and Service Learning
Means (Standard Deviations in parentheses), t-values

How often do you feel...	n	School Classes	Service Learning	t-value
Bored	60	2.23 (.59)	1.40 (.62)	8.23* p=.00
Grown-up	60	2.07 (.55)	2.58 (.70)	-4.58* p=.00
Important	60	2.15 (.66)	2.58 (.62)	-4.25* p=.00
Sure of self	60	2.45 (.62)	2.45 (.68)	.00 p=.99
Responsible	60	2.62 (.56)	2.70 (.56)	-1.04 p=.30

Note: Students respond on a 3-point scale from Rarely (1) to Often (3).

II. Perceived Opportunities and the Specific Service Experience

We considered three characteristics of the service experience which might be related to students' perceptions. First, we examined the relationship between students' perceptions of reflection and their perceived learning opportunities for Service Learning. Second, we contrasted students who were engaged in two different quarters of service learning within the same program. Lastly, we considered whether there was evidence of site differences.

Correlations - Developmental Opportunities and Reflection

Students were asked four questions concerning their reflection experience: I better understand why things happened, I felt embarrassed or uncomfortable, I learned new or better ways to

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work, and I think reflection is a waste of time. They responded to the statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Almost Always). The scoring of negatively worded items was reversed (items 2 and 4). Mean responses to the four questions ranged from 2.90 (sd = 1.19, I better understand why thing happened) to 3.65 (sd = 1.10, I feel embarrassed or uncomfortable). A summed score was calculated (alpha reliability = .789) and the items considered as both a total score and individually.

There was a moderate relationship (r = .651, p = .000) between students' summed Developmental Opportunities score for Service Learning and their summed reflection score. Correlations among individual items from both scales (presented in Appendix A) shows that correlations varied and did not simply represent repetitive patterns of responding to the two groups of items. The strongest relationship (r = .63, p = .000) was between the reflection item, "I better understood why things happened" with the Developmental Opportunities item, "I thought carefully about difficult judgments." However, across the board, the reflection item, "I learned new or better ways to work" was consistently related to perceived developmental opportunities - with 12 of 17 correlations over .35.

Differences between Quarter 1 and Quarter 2

The service program at this school was not designed to differ across quarters and students in both quarters visited the same sites. The first indication of differences was found on student responses to the question, *What did you learn from doing Service Learning?* It appeared that students from the second quarter were more likely to report learning "nothing." The data were further examined and it was found that, of 57 students, nine (16%) reported that they learned "nothing." Of these nine, all participated during quarter two.

The data were further examined to identify other differences between the two quarters. Students in quarter one perceived greater opportunities afforded by service learning than students in quarter two, t(50) = 2.20, p = .033. For the summed scores, the mean for quarter one students was 68.93 (sd = 12.02), while the mean for quarter two students was 60.56 (sd = 15.37). Examination of individual items revealed that students from quarter one, in comparison to those in quarter two, felt free to solve problems on their own (q1, M = 4.28; q2, M = 3.32), made important decisions (q1, M = 4.31; q2, M = 3.17), thought carefully about difficult judgments (q1, M = 4.31; q2, M = 3.24), examined important personal values (q1, M = 4.00; q2, M = 3.17), and wondered about whether they would do good work (q1, M = 4.07; q2, M = 3.17). When the nine students who reported they learned "nothing" were omitted from the analyses differences between the two quarters were still found on two of the items: I was free to solve problems on my own and I thought carefully about difficult judgments.

Furthermore, it was found that of 14 students who reported they would not like to do service learning again, 12 (86%) were from quarter two; this is 34% of the quarter two sample. Of 12 students who would not recommend service to a friend 11 (92%) were from quarter two; this is 31% of the quarter two sample. Students from the two quarters also differed in how useful they believed reflection. Students from quarter one were more likely to think that during reflection they better understood why things happened, $t(58) = 4.14$, $p = .000$, learned new or better ways to work, $t(58) = 2.25$, $p = .028$, and were less likely to think that reflection was a waste of time, $t(58) = 2.84$, $p = .006$. The means and standard deviations for these three items for quarter one and two students, respectively, were: 3.48 (sd = .91), 2.35 (sd = 1.17); 3.28 (sd = .99), 2.61 (sd = 1.26); and 3.59 (sd = 1.24), 2.61 (sd = 1.41).

Differences Across Sites

In an effort to explore site differences, the summed scores for the Developmental Opportunities scales were reviewed both within and across sites. Due to the small number of students within each site it was decided to examine these data descriptively rather than statistically. The number of students working at a given site ranged from one to twelve.

Means on the Developmental Opportunities for Service Learning varied across sites from 55 to 74 (on a total scale of 17 to 85) with a median of 66.375., an average of 3.9 on the five point scale (often true). This suggests that on average students at each site reported having opportunities which were favorable. Examination of individual student summed scores, however, suggested that there was great variability in the opportunities perceived available within sites (see Table 4). When quarter was considered it did not provide any insight into the within-site differences. That is, the higher and lower scores were not consistently related to quarter. Furthermore, the type of site, e.g., preschool or senior center, also seemed to have little relation to students reported developmental opportunities. In brief, the differences between sites did not appear meaningful in relation to the wide range of responses within sites and could not be explained by quarter or type of site.

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Table 4

Perceived Developmental Opportunities Within Sites

Site	n	Min	Max	Range	Mean	sd
Preschool	1	74	74	0	74.0	0.00
Preschool	2	66	77	11	71.5	7.78
Elementary	10	50	83	33	69.3	10.18
Preschool	8	43	85	42	68.9	16.23
Senior Center	4	48	79	31	66.8	13.60
Handicapped	3	47	79	32	66.0	16.82
Preschool	9	35	81	46	64.1	14.64
Preschool	4	49	82	33	62.5	15.23
Preschool	10	21	73	52	56.7	16.96
Senior Center	1	55	55	0	55.0	0.00

Discussion

The results presented in this paper are preliminary. They represent the first phase of a 2-1/2 year study of service learning in the middle school years. The findings however have guided our thinking about the larger study. They have suggested new questions and areas for exploration. We are not clear that the specific findings will hold up with a larger sample. Nor do we know how specific these are to the particular school we selected. However, the findings do indicate we need to carefully consider many aspects of the service experience when speaking about the opportunities the experience provides. Furthermore, students appear to be able to provide useful data for studying these areas.

The findings indicate that students who participate in service learning report the experience provides different learning opportunities than school. Students most strongly felt they made a contribution and had the opportunity to express important personal values. Students also reported they felt less bored, more grown up and more important during service learning than during school. Interestingly, students indicated that school improves their opportunities for the future more than service learning. This result, however, seemed to be a function of a small subset of students (n=9) who reported that they learned "nothing" from participating in Service Learning. When these students were dropped from all analyses this difference was no longer statistically significant (School Class mean = 4.07; Service Learning mean = 3.84). The pattern of other significant service learning-school differences remained the same, although all means increased. It appears these nine students viewed both school and service learning as providing fewer learning opportunities, resulting in lower mean scores in both areas. However, there was no statistically significant difference

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between these nine students and the remaining group in their initial perceptions of the opportunities provided by school. Although these nine students were all from quarter two, they worked at five different sites and it is not readily apparent how their experiences differed from the remaining sample. Further research might involve interviewing these students to help understand why they found the service experience was not worthwhile.

The findings of a pilot study with fifty students, including students from a different Service Learning program, also revealed that Service Learning provided different opportunities than school. However, the specific items on which significant differences were found varied from those of the present study. For example, students in the pilot work indicated that through service learning they were "exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world" (item 14), a difference not found here. Additional information concerning the pilot sample's site and reflection experiences were not available. In the present study we were able to explore several service characteristics, including differences across quarters, sites, and students' perceptions of reflection.

The differences across quarters were unexpected since the program was designed to be consistent throughout the academic year. Even when the nine students who appeared different from the remaining sample were omitted, quarter differences were found. Students from quarter one reported solving problems on their own and thinking carefully about difficult judgments. Thus far, it is unclear why these differences appeared. To help understand these issues we will be meeting with program staff and students. In particular, we are interested in learning about the reflection components across the two quarters. It is anticipated that these discussions will facilitate our understanding of these findings and may lead to an examination of areas we have not yet considered. Throughout the development of this work, teachers and program leaders have provided insight into both the study design and interpretation of pilot work. They also continue to provide information about the sites at which students work.

Researchers have noted that site differences need to be considered when describing the impact of service learning (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988). Our results indicated that there is a great deal of variability within sites. That is, while some students at a given site reported many learning opportunities, other students reported few. The variability within sites was not due to quarter one students having consistently higher means, although overall these students responded more favorably, nor to differences in the type of site at which students worked, e.g., preschool versus senior center. This finding suggests that the specific activities in which students engage in at a particular site needs to be more closely studied. Recent conversations with several Helpers support this research direction. Some students working at a preschool are primarily responsible for manual

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tasks, such as stapling papers, and serve as Helper to the teacher. Others have greater opportunities to interact with the preschoolers, such as reading stories or assisting with a game.

In addition to site and quarter differences, we examined how responses were related to students' evaluation of reflection as assessed by four questions. The findings indicated that students who viewed reflection positively also reported more opportunities available from Service Learning. This reinforces the view that reflection is viewed as a related component of the service experience, as reported by students. We did not observe reflection or document its specific characteristics (e.g., structure, format, activities, etc.). Thus, we do not know how reflection adds to students' experience of service learning. Work is underway to more closely identify reflection characteristics and processes, and to develop hypotheses about the specific relationship between reflection and service learning impact.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that the examination of the opportunities afforded by Service Learning is a complex topic which must be considered within the context of program characteristics and students' perceptions of the experience. Service learning programs may appear similar (e.g., students may work at similar sites and have weekly reflection), but often students have different perceptions of what seems consistent on the surface. While we believe that school and service consistently provide different opportunities, we also believe the results are specific to students' perceptions of the experience. A key implication of this work is that care must be taken when aggregating data across programs without first examining the variability within programs and even within sites. In future work, we will consider other program characteristics, including the specific activities which occur at the sites and during reflection.

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Appendix A

Correlations Among Developmental Opportunities (Service Learning) and Reflection Items

Developmental Opportunities Statements	Reflection			
	Itemi	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4
1 My ideas and comments were taken seriously.	.233	.096	.196	.218
2 I felt I made a contribution.	.226	.263	.317	.302
3 I received appropriate credit or blame.	.388*	.315	.433**	.411*
4 I was free to solve problems on my own.	.577**	.232	.512**	.409*
5 I made important decisions.	.341*	.356*	.550**	.425**
6 I thought carefully about difficult judgements.	.627**	.339*	.575**	.366*
7 Adults took notice of my work.	.334*	.233	.320	.270
8 Other young people respected my efforts.	.291	.024	.353*	.317
9 Improved my opportunities for the future.	.486**	.397*	.472**	.408*
10 I had to examine some important personal values.	.426**	.246	.515**	.439**
11 I expressed important personal values.	.514**	.084	.580**	.354*
12 I discussed carefully questions about my experiences.	.361*	.248	.428**	.357*
13 I participated in activities I had never done before.	.219	.098	.438**	.290

Appendix A (Continued)

Developmental Opportunities Statements	Reflection			
	Item1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4
14 I was exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world.	.281	.208	.345*	.317
15 I wondered about whether I would do good work.	.271	.101	.336*	.239
16 I tried my hardest, gave my best effort.	.376*	.217	.485**	.532**
17 I accomplished things I never thought I could do.	.372*	.344*	.459**	.379*

* p<.01, ** p< .001 N of cases 52
Reflection statements: How often do you...
Item 1 - better understand why things happened
Item 2 - feel embarrassed or uncomfortable (scoring reversed)
Item 3 - learn new or better ways to work
Item 4 - think reflection was a waste of time (scoring reversed)

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